Relational Social Work at the community level

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Abstract

This article examines community work as an important level of social work and aims to show the contribution that the principles of a Relational Social Work (RSW) approach can make to the field. First, the meaning of community work and its role in social work is analysed. Then, the way in which the professional, as a relational guide, is able to support the community in the different phases of the problem-solving process according to the RSW approach is considered.

Keywords

Relational Social Work – Community Work – Relational Guide – Poverty – Community Development.

Introduction

Over the years, in the fields of sociology, anthropology, economics and other branches of knowledge, the term community has been given several meanings. Subsequently, there have been many interpretations of the term by social policies. For instance, there has been a need to distinguish the concept of community and society and their different aspects (Tonnies, 1887). It is therefore first necessary to define the meaning that Social Work gives to the term «community» to understand how this term has been applied to the field.

In her studies, Mayo notes that the term community has often been a subject of confusion and objections (Mayo, 2002). The term's different meanings will be analysed and summarized as they developed over the years with a focus on the relevance of the concept for community work. Mayo identifies two meanings for the word «community».

The first meaning refers to community as a shared place and thus as the totality of social bonds based on belonging to a common geographical area. Bonds between subjects who live in the same flat complex, neighbourhood or village can be included in this definition. The second meaning refers to community as the totality of bonds based on

shared interests, such as passions, ethnic, cultural or linguistic belonging, experiencing the same phase of the life cycle or similar problems. For instance, foreign people from the same country who live in a certain town and who periodically gather to celebrate parties or cultural and religious events can be considered in this definition, as can drug addicts' parents who founded a support association to encourage each other.

Community work as a level of social work

Once the term «community» has been defined, it becomes necessary to specify what is meant by community work. It is important to start by saying that community work has not been confined to social work professions but was originally an approach to social work (Mayo, 2002).

The level of community work can be found in the origins of social work. The Settlement Houses movement was born during the economic crisis in the late 1800s in new neighbourhoods in American cities that were involved in intense urban expansion. The movement's main goal was to be of service to poverty-stricken people by facilitating community development instead of building institutes or seeking help from charity (Bortoli, 2006). In this way, community work developed as a professional activity alongside volunteer activities, charity associations and organizations in the social field.

Over the years, it has become necessary to define the level of community work to distinguish it from other social work levels. To provide a broad definition, community work focuses on helping «*people with shared interests to come together, work out what their needs are among themselves and then jointly take action together to meet those needs, by developing projects which would enable the people concerned to gain support to meet them or by campaigning to ensure that they are met by those responsible*» (Payne, 1995, p. 165).

In particular, over the years, community work has been applied to social exclusion, poverty, and discrimination due to class, race, sex and age (Mayo, 2002). Community work has had a long history in many parts of the world, forestalling a social work evolution that occurred in the 1990s in Great Britain. In England, community work was defined as being concerned «*with enabling people to improve the quality of their lives and gain greater influences over the processes that affect them*» (AMA, 1993, p.10) because of the change in social policies in those years.

Twelvetrees, the author of one of the most well-known handbooks on the topic, defined community work as the «*process of assisting ordinary people to improve their own communities by undertaking collective action*» (Twelvetrees, 2002, p. 1)*.

Therefore, community work aims to support subjects who experience common problems and need to gather to find common answers to shared situations. That process has to occur through collective, preventive and anti-discriminatory approaches based on the values of participation and empowerment (Mayo, 2002).

A broad aim and the involvement of many people are typical of community work. However, these are not sufficiently distinctive features to distinguish community work from the case work and group work levels. Thus, these features do not define community work. Community work pursues an aim whose achievement relies on a community of people unknown to the professional. Nevertheless, the subjects are thought to benefit from the actions as the subjects belong to a determined geographical area or to a community that shares interests or needs.

In addition, not every intervention with a collective aim can be classified as community work. For instance, political plans, the general rearrangement of service providers or their periodical planning are not classified as community work. What distinguishes a community work process from the abovementioned interventions with community value? What marks community work is the participation in both the aim definition and the action ideation and implementation that occur to pursue it (Mayo, 2002; Twelvetrees, 2002; Raineri, 2005).

Different approaches

Over the years, community work has spread remarkably, although in Italy it has been and remains less commonly applied than case work and group work due to the numerous complexities that the social work level implies. Therefore, community work has developed along different perspectives and has been applied since the 1970s in countries that have developed a welfare state system ascribable to both left-wing and right-wing policies.

Twelvetrees (2002) identified two main typologies of collective scope initiatives. On the one hand, he defined the professional approach, which promotes the self-help strategy and improves service delivery by adding value to the already existing relations in the local community. In particular, this approach is applied to welfare deregulation as it supports the employment of resources from the market or the Third Sector in the face of a shortage of welfare state resources. Along with resizing public expenditure to help provisions and social care services, the development of relationships and informal help inside communities, as real, usual life contexts for citizens, is promoted. Lena Dominelli (1990; 2004) distinguished three models ascribable to this first approach. The first model is community care, in which Social Services work together with the community in promoting caring volunteer activities. This approach cannot be considered community work when it is not promoted through the participation of the whole collective due to its broad aim. In many instances, it becomes a proxy for service providers to compensate for welfare provision insufficiency with community resources. Community care has potential only if it is able to support the community and encourage it towards reflection and active engagement to find answers to the needs of its members (Folgheraiter, 2006; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2004; Bulmer, 1987).

The second model, according to Dominelli, is represented by community organization and includes shared actions between welfare services to improve planning and local services coordination.

The author identified community development as a model that helps the community to find answers to its needs independently. This model can be included in the professional approach since a professional figure is involved in accompanying the community at the request of a Local Authority that has identified social problems.

The other macro approach identified by Twelvetrees (2002), in opposition to the professional approach, is the so-called radical approach, which aims to give voice to minority groups to promote anti-oppressive strategies and fight against social exclusion and discrimination to rebalance the social structures that are thought to be at the basis of increased inequity in treatment and rights. In this model, Dominelli (2002a; 2002b) distinguished three approaches: class-based community action, feminist community action, and community action from a black perspective.

Nonetheless, Twelvetrees himself recognized that the terms «professional» and «radical» can create problems and misunderstandings on many levels. On the one hand, the use of the term «professional» applied to an approach may imply that the radical approach does not need knowledge, abilities and professional skills, although that is not the case. On the other hand, the term «radical» may address political extreme positions. To avoid such misunderstandings, Mayo (1994) suggested using the terms «technicist» and «transformational» to refer, respectively, to the two approaches.

As the abovementioned authors note, in social work practice, there is not a neat division among the different approaches. Confrontations and debates are still open on both the theoretical classification and the actual application. It is important to note that practitioners need to have a clear distinction in the different work approaches, of the many values that each of the mentioned models entail and of the implications for the involved community.

Community work and the Relational Social Work approach

We have noted what the abovementioned approaches have in common and what can be distinguished by the element of active participation. To focus on this principle, this article introduces the RSW approach (Folgheraiter, 2004; 2007; 2011; 2012; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017) in the framework of relational sociology (Donati, 2010) as an effective methodology to implement social work at the community level.

RSW focuses on relationships as the basis for change. It is a practice paradigm in which practitioners identify and resolve problems by facilitating coping networks (conceived of as a set of relationships between people interested in a common aim) to enhance their resilience and capacities for action at both individual and collective levels (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017). The central idea of RSW is that change emerges from a reciprocal aid,

both between people in difficult circumstances, family members, friends and neighbours and between the network and the social worker. The practitioner helps the network to develop reflexivity and improve itself in enhancing welfare, and—in turn—the network helps the practitioner to better understand how he/she can help it, even when the goal is to counter structural inequalities (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012).

Given that help is constructed through the relationship between practitioners and coping social networks and that the contribution of those directly concerned is essential for such construction, RSW is connected with constructive social work (Parton & O'Byrne, 2001), anti-oppressive social work (Dominelli, 2002a; 2012) and anti-discriminatory social work (Thompson, 2006; 2011). These approaches call for humanistic and relational sensitive practices in Social Services since they emphasize that users, carers and their relatives should have a voice and as much power as professionals.

Although intended to provide a broader understanding of persistent social problems, RSW was developed within a Western social context and can only be applied elsewhere with caution. Nevertheless, a number of good social work practices implemented in non-Western contexts can be understood in light of the relational paradigm.

Participative and inclusive ways of working are engaged to mobilize and develop support and problem-solving networks. For this process, RSW shares the values and tools of community work and can read into it in a way that amplifies the structure and basis of it.

In particular, RSW can contribute greatly to social work at the community level since, as we have observed, participation is the central element of this work level. In fact, in case work and group work, the help dimension can coexist with a dimension of control, often because social workers operate in situations where Local Authorities ask for an intervention in circumstances of danger, such as with child protection, coping with dependences or working with young or adult offenders. In such situations, social workers also need to operate when faced with low or non-existent initial motivation from the recipients for the intervention. Because of its constitutive characteristics, community work needs people who are truly and strongly motivated and who give importance to their engagement to achieve the goal of pursuing a common aim. Otherwise, community workers will not be able to develop community processes that actually respond to local needs and are efficient and long lasting. RSW can be a suitable approach for social workers who are working at the community level as it gives clear instructions on how can one develop participation that focuses on people with their own resources and experiential knowledge and support mutual relations.

Therefore, we can define Relational Community Work as the methodology that copes with collective aims and involves and facilitates the autonomous action of subjects belonging to the same community who feel a determined concern and are willing to activate for a change (Folgheraiter, 2011).

Facing a broad aim, RSW intends to identify and connect to people in a community to promote open planning instead of involving them in a predefined intervention process.

To perform this open planning, it is necessary to consider organizational and relational conditions that allow motivated people in a community to meet, reflect, orient themselves and decide step-by-step the necessary actions to pursue the expected benefit.

Phases of the methodological process: relational guidance in Relational Community Work

The methodological framework for coping with a problem at the community level through the perspective of RSW will now be presented. To analyse the process, *relational problem-solving* phases will be followed (Folgheraiter, 2011; Raineri, 2004; Calcaterra, 2017). These phases can also be applied to case work (Calcaterra, 2017) and group work (Raineri, 2017) with elements adapted to the inherently different circumstances of community work. Problem solving is a method that is often employed in helping professions. For social work, many studies of its applications have been conducted (Perlman, 1957; De Robertis, 1986). The RSW approach addresses *relational problem solving* since several steps of the method are developed inside of a helping network and not solely by the professional, who is believed to be the one who needs to find a solution to the problem. Thus, *relational problem solving* allows support for collective participation in community work projects.

In RSW, the professional who intends to facilitate the common action of a totality of connected subjects who pursue a common aim through a participative process is called the «relational guide». Each of these subjects is the bearer of resources, weaknesses, interests, experiences and personal points of view. The professional must recognize, add value and combine these characteristics. Thus, the relational guide performs a networking task (Folgheraiter, 2011). The professional gets closer to a situation without a defined solution or process and has an open and flexible attitude by creating the process along with the people in the coping network in a way that is not predefined.

As an example, an experience of Relational Community Work implemented in 2012 in a small town of Northern Italy to fight against poverty and social exclusion will be described. Roles and functions of the relational guide in the community work process, hereafter divided into the four phases for easier exposition, will be analysed.

In a little town in Northern Italy, a parish priest noticed that many families in the food distribution service of his parish came from a neighbourhood in the city centre. He had also heard complaints of an increase in mistrust in recent years. The priest then started to piece together the information from different sources and understood that there were several families living with social hardship in that area. He was also concerned by the architectural structure of the neighbourhood: ten blocks of flats are arranged in a circle and face a common internal area with just one way to enter. The neighbourhood is not reachable by any other street. It is closed on the inside and it is not frequented by anyone but the residents. According to the

priest, along with the existing hardships, this isolation met the preconditions for the forma-tion of a ghetto.

Co–defining the problem and the potential coping network

The parish priest decided to express his concern to social workers, showing his willingness to engage in improving the situation.

To verify the concern, two social workers reached out to other colleagues, practitioners in non-profit organizations and politicians and collected demographic data for a better un-derstanding of the neighbourhood evolution over the years. They also met the residents of the area with the priest, visiting the families in their houses to become acquainted with their lives and stories and to focus not only on their concerns but also on the motivation to improve the neighbourhood and their lives in it. The workers were thus able to confirm the initial concerns shown by the priest and to identify other ones. The main issues of the community were as follows:

- *Economic struggles due to losing jobs after the economic crisis or accidents, concerns about pressure in the domestic environment caused by husbands who now stay at home for the whole day, and increases in male aggressive behaviour towards wives and children, probably due to the feeling of uselessness, ineffectiveness and stress over the pointless job search.*
- *Presence of inter-ethnic conflicts due to the coexistence of 21 nationalities required to cope with completely different languages, habits, cultures and communicative approaches every day.*
- *Struggle with the children's education; children are often left alone during extracur-ricular time because of the inability of the parents to help them with homework or pay for sport and creative activities or music classes.*

A professional may choose to start the facilitation of a community process for several reasons. Everything starts by becoming aware of a concern about a current social hard-ship or a possible similar problem in the future. The professional can become acquainted with the concern in different ways.

The social worker may be working with different people individually and realize that they share a similar problem. For instance, she/he may notice that the number of people living with a problem connected to alcohol dependence is increasing in a local community, that an increasing number of parents are having educational struggles with their teenage children, or even that in recent months, many families are asking for economic help. In this way, a reflective professional who notices an increase in a certain problem may start looking at it as a collective concern and begin a community process to improve the situation.

The practitioner may learn about a problem from another professional or figure in the community in a privileged position who is able to perceive the needs of the local community. This process may occur if her/his manager, the parish priest, the general practitioner, a teacher or an educator brings a concern that involves numerous subjects to the professional's attention.

One of the people who directly experiences the problem may draw the professional's attention to the concern. He could become a spokesperson for others who share his discomfort or for those who have noticed someone else's problem. For instance, some families in a certain area become aware of homeless men sleeping under their block of flats and decide to express their concern to the professionals.

Whatever the method, the professional now knows about a situation of collective hardship, and her/his task is to read into the situation and collect more information. The first thing that the professional has to do is to understand who shares the identified concern in the local community. In this way, the worker will become aware of not only the people who are concerned but also those who are motivated and available to do something to cope with it. In his well-known textbook, Twelvetrees (2002) mentions the *construction of a community profile* and notes the need to collect hard and soft information for it to be successful.

With regard to hard information, the author identifies quantitative data that can be provided by the Local Authority or studies and research previously conducted in the local community about the identified topic. This process also includes information that can be collected from the Public and Third Sector, from Social Services or from the market that offers services and projects in that area of interest. With regard to soft information, the author identifies the personal points of view that can be collected in many ways. Among others, Twelvetrees (2002) mentions individual meetings through house calls, focus groups, hand-delivered questionnaires, and mailings.

In this way, the professional obtains an idea of who else, other than her/him and the informer, perceives the concern. According to RSW, this phase is fundamental for another reason: the professional will not only recognize who shares the concern, but he will also be able to start defining a potential coping network (Folgheraiter, 2011) composed of all the subjects willing to reflect together in an open way since they are interested in improving the situation. This point allows us to underline that in the data collection phase, the potentially involved subjects will possibly meet. Nonetheless, not all of them will be part of the initial network. In fact, among those, there will be people who, despite being concerned, are not aware of the problem. These are people who do not see what the others perceive as a concern. There will be other people who understand the situation but do not consider it an actual problem and thus do not perceive it as a difficulty. There are also those who are aware that the situation is a problem but are not willing to do anything to improve it. Still other subjects are already engaged in coping with the hardship and consider their actions sufficiently effective. As a result, they are not available to engage in another reflection and joint action process (Folgheraiter, 2011; Raineri, 2004).

In the example mentioned above, the parish priest knew the residents of the neighbourhood and their problems as he had a privileged point of view. The information reached him and concerned him, and he decided to approach the social workers to ask for help. In this way, the operators could identify an initial network composed of the workers and the parish priest, who was the first to perceive the problem and to do something to cope with it. Subsequently, the social workers started to reflect with the priest to figure out how they could understand the neighbourhood and its residents and to identify who perceived a concern apart from the priest. To identify these people, they started to investigate the context in which the concern first arose, getting to know the local community and who worked in it, meeting and listening to potentially involved or interested people and collecting information through different channels: newspapers, databases, interviews with politicians, executives, colleagues, and others. House calls allowed the community workers and the priest to share concerns about the neighbourhood with the residents and collect information on the difficulties of every family. Furthermore, meeting the residents allowed social workers to be aware of the resources, competences and availability of the residents. Among the families, some showed their willingness to do something to improve the situation of those who lived in that neighbourhood. Social workers thus identified an initial network composed of themselves, the priest and 9 residents of the neighbourhood who were personally experiencing economic struggles and were willing to do something first-hand for the improvement of their own and others' situation.

Sharing a common aim

After identifying some families in economic difficulty who showed their willingness to do something for the improvement of the life of the neighbourhood, social workers invited them to a group meeting. At first, the concerns about job loss were shared by many families. The operators asked the participants to share their point of view about the problem, and by doing so, the subjects started to get to know each other and found that they were experiencing similar struggles, analogous daily life situations and the same fears for the future. A motivation to work together therefore developed to cope with the shared hardship. Some people mentioned other families living in the area who they believed were sharing that same concern. Others decided not to engage first-hand in the improvement of the situation, not because they did not share the problem but due to feelings of shame or being already engaged in taking other steps that were considered more important at that time. In this way, community workers supported the network in defining the aim to pursue, expressed as sustaining the families in the neighbourhood in times of economic difficulty.

To shift from an observation and listening level to an action level, the relational guide must share his perception with the identified network (Folgheraiter, 2011; Raineri, 2004). The professional has to meet people willing to consider how to cope with the difficulty.

He will potentially value expanding the network with them, strengthening the motivation of the others who are not fully aware or willing to do something.

The professional is inside and outside the network at the same time. The professional is *inside* in that she/he shares the concern and is engaged in openly reflecting on the ways to cope with the difficulty and puts himself/herself at the same level as the interlocutors. Nonetheless, the relation guide is also *outside* the network since she/he has to maintain a facilitation role inside of it, observing the network from an external perspective. The professional has to constantly focus on the division to observe himself as part of the network, as a facilitator and to observe the local community with which the network interacts and to which she/he is always open. Indeed, it is important to remember that the initial network will not be a definitive network. Other subjects may join, and others may leave because they do not share the aim, as we will discuss later. What matters is that the relational guide maintains a sincere, flexible and helpful attitude and willingness to change along the way and draws attention the wider context with regard to the initial network.

In the example above, the professionals invited the subjects with interest to a group meeting with the purpose of sharing a concern and defining an aim to pursue together. They employed a technique borrowed from counseling to accomplish this goal: reflective listening. (Rogers & Kinget, 1965; Mucchielli, 1983; Carkhuff, 1987; Hough, 1996). As we are considering a group context, we will address collective reformulation. The professionals showed concern that encouraged them to do something and asked the participants to express their points of view and experiences about the problem. Relational guides reformulated what the single subject noted to the group. This procedure allowed every participant to become aware of the hardship and realize that there were other people with similar specific needs. In fact, creating a shared awareness in a network is the essential element for it to become a real network. This phase was useful since the people who did not recognize themselves in the concern or who realized that they were not willing to be engaged in the improvement could speak their mind and decide not to take part in the process. Others were able to inform other people who shared such an interest and invite them to the following meetings. A reading test of the initial network made by the professionals occurred, and the problem was defined as a common task (Raineri, 2004).

In this phase of the process, the professionals paid attention to the fact that the problem was defined in a proactive, action-oriented way and avoided the formation of blaming dynamics towards the outside. This approach is important since the following steps in which the network will take action are oriented towards the way the problem has been previously defined. To do so, every member must be responsible and become engaged in the improvement of the hardship.

The network thus defines a common aim. This represents the guiding light of the whole process in which the network subjects will take part. The common aim represents what needs to be pursued through the taken actions, and it is the element that unites

the network. Sharing an aim gives an identity to the group, and every subject is able to recognize herself/himself in the ongoing process. Furthermore, remembering the pre-determined aim is the relational guide's task. The guide also must be able to keep the motivation high at any moment in the process (Folgheraiter, 2011).

Brainstorming, strategy definition and network expansion

The relational guides suggested to the initial network to meet again to decide how to proceed. Meanwhile, the parish priest received a proposal: two supermarkets in town offered to donate the groceries left every evening to the people in need. The priest discussed it with the families, who suggested starting a collection and distribution process for the products among the families in the neighbourhood that would be directly managed by them. As the majority of them were jobless, they had time to devote. In fact, they were engaged in the organization and management of the process. There was thus a brainstorming phase to understand the best way to manage the activity. Each of the participants had the chance to give ideas and suggestions, showing their personal willingness and needs. During two network sessions, an actual plan was written down with an assessment of the available resources. The roles of each participant were also defined. The group decided the rules at the base of the service through a long mediation process. These rules included the criteria for involvement of the poverty-stricken families, delivery and food distribution methods, criteria for division of the collected goods, and other criteria. In this phase, the network considered appropriately enlarging the network to involve other subjects in the zone to give volunteer help in managing the activity.

Reading into a collective difficulty does not mean that the expert works in a network vision from that moment onward. Community workers could still start a process in which they determine the possible strategy to find a solution to the problem causing hardship once a common aim that responds to a widely share need is identified.

RSW demonstrates why making shared decisions in action implementation is important and gives clear operational indications regarding how people need to be assisted in the process. The presented approach starts from the idea that no one knows the best solutions to apply better than those who live with the life problem (Folgheraiter, 2011)**.** First, this is because they know the attempts that have been made before. In addition, it is because the concept of wellbeing is personal. The inability to produce a definition of wellbeing that applies to all makes it difficult to apply the logic of diagnosis and treatment. Furthermore, each of the involved subjects knows which actions can be carried out in their life context and what is truly useful for them. Folgheraiter states that the actions to cope with the problem start with meeting the reduced abilities (Folgheraiter, 2011). Every subject brings his point of view, but he does not know what the right solution will be from the start or where the taken actions will lead. This lack of knowledge is always the case, especially in community work, where the pursuit of wellbeing concerns many and action

is led by a community of subjects, each with interests, wishes and difficulties. The expert takes part in this process as well. He cannot know from the start, despite his knowledge and technical competence, what the best solution for pursuing wellbeing will be as it is perceived differently by the subjects and differs with regard to community workers' previous experiences. For these reasons, RSW suggests developing solutions together, joining the experiential knowledge of the community (Folgheraiter, 2011) to the relational guide's facilitation abilities and wide vision. In the *relational problem-solving* process, strategies are defined through brainstorming. This phase is a creative generation process of theoretical solutions, or solutions that are possible (Folgheraiter, 2011; Raineri, 2004).

In the abovementioned example, relational guides focused on making every member of the coping network part of making the decisions concerning the implementation strategies. In fact, interaction between many people allows the generation of more ideas and allows each of the participants to be an active part of the process. Every subject felt free to suggest a strategy to cope with the problem without being afraid of the others' or the professional's judgment. Relational guides tried to encourage everyone's participation and create a welcoming and open environment.

The evaluation of the suggestions occurred at a later time and aimed to decide what actions to implement. Brainstorming was thus a reflective passage. Its goal was to create the conditions so that the process, which was not defined by the practitioners, could occur and lead to what the community truly needed. Relational guides paid attention to the decisions, which had to be shared by the entire network and actually respond to the problem. The relational guides showed the network where the actions were leading and helped the subjects understand whether the actions were leading to the common aim. This process occurred through feedback. Furthermore, the experts accompanied the network in the evaluation of the sustainability of their actions in the local community, helping to determine whether they interfered with other systems or actions that were already taking place in the community.

In this phase, everyone's role was defined, and people could apply for roles connected to their talents and possibilities depending on availability and on personal and family engagement. The members of the coping network reflected on the opportunity to enlarge the network to include other subjects who could add their contributions to the initial network. Relational guides helped the members reflect on the involvement of other residents or professionals who could contribute at both a reflective and operational level. This decision was shared by the coping network. In this enlargement of the participation of informal subjects, people or families belonging to the concerned community are preferred so that the community is led towards an autonomous way of living. Involving agencies or professionals could, in fact, create dynamics of proxies or dependence (Raineri, 2004). The process should make the community responsible and active as it pursues its wellbeing. The actions that occur will not be connected to external resources depending on the will of Local Authorities or the Third

Sector, whose referents are not linked to the aim shared by the community. Nonetheless, we should keep in mind that involving other people in implementing activities also means building an action plan together with them instead of designating them for the execution of certain tasks. The subjects should share the aim and be able to freely express their ideas and action proposals so that they can operate towards the direction suggested by the coping network and keep their motivation high during the process.

Helping the network in implementing the strategies, monitoring the plan and coping with further problems

The food distribution activity began. The network decided to meet every fifteen days to reflect on the difficulties that arose during the activity. Relational guides facilitated communication and motivated the group by asking them whether the implemented actions were pursuing the common aim. The members were helped in reflecting on other possible needs in the neighbourhood. From this open reflection, families mentioned the hardship connected to children and teenagers' education. More brainstorming occurred, and two activities, promoted and carried out by the community, were conceived: an after-school club and entertainment activities in the neighbourhood. The initial network identified other activities, responding to the common aim to help families in economic difficulty. To manage these activities, the network had to expand, and it was necessary to create new networks for managing the activities.

In the phase of activity fulfilment, the relational guides made sure that everyone was aware of their tasks. The experts carried out their tasks like the other members of the coping network. Professionals also had to monitor the project. Social workers proposed that the members meet periodically to share the unexpected difficulties that appeared during the process and required a redefinition of the strategies. In fact, RSW suggests that the experts should not make an evaluation from the outside and judge the actions and aims pursued. Relational guides supported the network throughout the process, helping its members verify that the meaning of the action was responding to the defined aims.

In the abovementioned example, social workers accompanied the community in reading into the results and changes to reflect on the possibility of redefining or widening the aim. The undetermined process mentioned before demonstrates that there is no such thing as a wrong or right point of arrival. It is essential for the members of the community to cooperate, building relations between them and moving towards the direction that they think would work best for the community in that moment.

Relational guides tried to help the members of the coping network in strengthening their feelings as part of a community that can reflect on itself and act for its wellbeing through active involvement of its members. In this way, the created network was able to restart the coping process with the definition of new problems in a participative way,

looking for strategies to cope with the need to support the children in the neighbourhood through creative activities and homework help.

TABLE 1:

The phases of methodological process and the role of the relational guide
in the Relational Community Work

The phases of the Me-thodological Process	The role of the Relatio-nal Guide	What the Relational Gui-de should avoid doing
Co-defining the problem and the potential coping network	To identify some people who are hypothetically concerned about the situation to understand their reasons and their motivation to do something together	Do not induce any concern
Sharing a common aim	To talk with motivated people and re-define the aim	Do not impose the pursuit of an aim only thought by the professional
Brainstorming, strategy definition and network expansion	To discuss with members of the network what can be done concretely and who can do each action or task	Do not identify the actions and do not explain to the members of the network what they have to do by assigning the tasks
Helping the network in implementing the strategies, monitoring the plan and coping with further problems	To support the members of the network in reflecting upon the process and upon what else could be differently done	Do not explain to the members of the network what actions worked and what did not work

Conclusions

The process presented here offers the possibility of attending to the needs of the community with the social worker, facilitating the subjects in understanding others' hardships, and discovering that these are often analogous to their hardships. This awareness makes people unite to find possible ways to improve the local community's situation together. Feeling personally responsible for the community in which one belongs, whatever that is, motivates individuals to do something and develop a sense of self-efficacy, which is reinforced by the actions of those who share the same journey. In the Relational Community Work experience demonstrated in this article, the residents were able to gain serenity and dignity by doing something useful for their families and

neighbours. In addition, they developed mutual trust through cooperation. This mutual trust reduced the level of conflict in the neighbourhood. Getting acquainted with each other allowed the development of self-help experiences in daily life, such as helping to take children to school, exchanging clothes, mutual help for bureaucratic paperwork, and advice on medical services and jobs. The process also allowed the practitioners to understand that there has been mutual learning among them and the families in the neighbourhood. Without the active participation of the neighbours, long-lasting activities would not have taken place, and the expert would not have been able to define the real needs of the community and the best process to pursue improvement. At the same time, the residents needed an external input that allowed them to meet and share concerns and wishes. A frame was necessary to create the conditions for mutual knowledge from which joint and reflective action arose.

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